

# The Cock of the Walk

BY MARY E. WILKINS FREEMAN

DOWN the road, kicking up the dust, until he marched, soldier-wise, in a cloud of it, that rose and grimed his moist face, and added to the heavy, brown powder upon the wayside weeds and flowers, whistling a queer, tuneless thing, which yet contained definite sequences—the whistle of a bird rather than a boy—approached Johnny Trumbull, aged ten, small of his age, but accounted by his mates mighty.

Johnny came of the best and oldest family in the village, but it was in some respects an undesirable family for a boy. In it survived, as fossils survive in ancient nooks and crannies of the earth, old traits of race, unchanged by time and environment. Living in a house lighted by electricity, the mental conception of it was to the Trumbulls as the conception of candles; with telephones at hand, they unconsciously still conceived of messages delivered with the old saying, "Ride, ride," etc., and relays of post-horses. They locked their doors, but still had latch-strings in mind. Johnny's father was a physician, adopting modern methods of surgery and prescription, yet his mind barked back to cupping and calomel, and now and then he swerved aside from his path across the field of the present into the future and plunged headlong, as if for fresh air, into the traditional past, and often with brilliant results.

Johnny's mother was a college graduate. She was the president of the woman's club. She read papers savoring of such feminine leaps ahead that they were like gymnastics, but she walked homeward with the gait of her great-grandmother, and inwardly regarded her husband as her lord and master. She minced genteelly, lifting her quite-fashionable skirts high above very slender ankles, which were hereditary. Not a woman of her race had ever gone home on thick ankles, and they all had gone home. They had all been at home, even

if abroad—at home in the truest sense. At the club, reading her inflammatory paper, Cora Trumbull's real self remained at home intent upon her mending, her dusting, her house economies. It was something remarkably like her astral body which presided at the club.

As for her unmarried sister Janet, who was older and had graduated from a young ladies' seminary instead of a college, whose early fancy had been guided into the ladylike ways of anti-macassars and pincushions and wax flowers under glass shades, she was a straighter proposition. No astral pretensions had Janet. She stayed, body and soul together, in the old ways, and did not even project her shadow out of them. There is seldom room enough for one's shadow in one's earliest way of life, but there was plenty for Janet's. There had been a Janet unmarried in every Trumbull family for generations. That in some subtle fashion accounted for her remaining single. There had also been an unmarried Jonathan Trumbull, and that accounted for Johnny's old bachelor uncle Jonathan. Jonathan was a retired clergyman. He had retired before he had preached long, because of doctrinal doubts, which were hereditary. He had a little, dark study in Johnny's father's house, which was the old Trumbull homestead, and he passed much of his time there, debating within himself that matter of doctrines.

Presently Johnny, assiduously kicking up dust, met his uncle Jonathan, who passed without the slightest notice. Johnny did not mind at all. He was used to it. Presently his own father appeared, driving along in his buggy the bay mare at a steady jog, with the next professional call quite clearly upon her equine mind. And Johnny's father did not see him. Johnny did not mind that, either. He expected nothing different.

Then Johnny saw his mother approach-

ing. She was coming from the club meeting. She held up her silk skirts high, as usual, and carried a nice little parcel of papers tied with ribbon. She also did not notice Johnny, who, however, out of sweet respect for his mother's nice silk dress, stopped kicking up dust. Mrs. Trumbull on the village street was really at home preparing a shortcake for supper.

Johnny eyed his mother's faded but rather beautiful face, under the rose-trimmed bonnet, with admiration and entire absence of resentment. Then he walked on and kicked up the dust again. He loved to kick up the dust in summer, the fallen leaves in autumn, and the snow in winter. Johnny was not a typical Trumbull. None of them had ever cared for simple amusements like that. Looking back for generations on his father and mother's side (both had been Trumbulls, but very distantly related), none could be discovered who in the least resembled Johnny. No dim blue eye of retrospection and reflection had Johnny; no tendency to tall slenderness which would later bow beneath the greater weight of the soul. Johnny was small, but wiry of build, and looked able to bear any amount of mental development without a lasting bend of his physical shoulders. Johnny had, at the early age of ten, whopped nearly every boy in school, but that was a secret of honor. It was well known in the school that, once the Trumbulls heard of it, Johnny could never whop again. "You fellows know," Johnny had declared once, standing over his prostrate and whimpering foe, "that I don't mind getting whopped at home, but they might send me

away to another school, and then I could never whop any of you fellows."

Johnny Trumbull kicking up the dust, himself dust-covered, his shoes, his little, queerly fitting dun suit, his cropped head, all thickly powdered, loved it. He sniffed in that dust like a grateful incense. He did not stop dust-kicking when he saw his aunt Janet coming, for, as he considered, her old black gown was not worth the sacrifice. It was true that she might see him. She sometimes did, if she were not reading a book as she walked. It had always been a habit with the Janet Trumbulls to read improving books when they walked abroad. To-day Johnny saw with a quick glance of those sharp, black eyes, so unlike the Trumbulls', that his aunt Janet was reading. He therefore expected her to pass him without recognition, and marched on kicking up the dust. But suddenly as he grew nearer the little, spry figure he was aware of a



HE LOVED TO KICK UP THE DUST IN SUMMER

pair of gray eyes, before which waved protectingly a hand clad in a black silk glove, with dangling finger-tips, because it was too long, and it dawned swiftly upon him that Aunt Janet was trying to shield her face from the moving column of brown motes. He stopped kicking, but it was too late. Aunt Janet had him by the collar, and was vigorously shaking him with nervous strength.

"You are a very naughty little boy," declared Aunt Janet. "You should know better than to walk along the street raising so much dust. No well-brought-up child ever does such things. Who are your parents, little boy?"

Johnny perceived that Aunt Janet did not recognize him, which was easily explained. She wore her reading-spectacles and not her far-seeing ones; besides, her reading-spectacles were obscured by dust, and her nephew's face was nearly obliterated. Also as she shook him his face was not much in evidence. Johnny disliked, naturally, to tell his aunt Janet that her own sister and brother-in-law were the parents of such a wicked little boy. He therefore kept quiet and submitted to the shaking, making himself as limp as a rag. This, however, exasperated Aunt Janet, who found herself encumbered by a dead weight of a little boy to be shaken, and suddenly Johnny Trumbull, the fighting champion of the town, the cock of the walk of the school, found himself being ignominiously spanked. That was too much. Johnny's fighting blood was up. He lost all consideration for circumstances, he forgot that Aunt Janet was not a boy, that she was quite near being an old lady. She had overstepped the bounds of privilege of age and sex, and an alarming state of equality ensued. Quickly the tables were turned. The boy became far from limp. He stiffened, then bounded and rebounded like wire. He butted, he parried, he observed all his famous tactics of battle, and poor Aunt Janet sat down in the dust, black dress, bonnet, glasses (but the glasses were off and lost), little improving book, black silk gloves, and all; and Johnny, hopeless, awful, irreverent, sat upon his aunt Janet's plunging knees, which seemed the most lively part of her. He kept his face twisted away from her, but it was not from cowardice.

Johnny was afraid lest Aunt Janet should be too much overcome by the discovery of his identity. He felt that it was his duty to spare her that. So he sat still, triumphant but inwardly agnostic.

It was fast dawning upon him that his aunt was not a little boy. He was not afraid of any punishment which might be meted out to him, but he was simply horrified. He himself had violated all the honorable conditions of warfare. He felt a little dizzy and ill, and he felt worse when he ventured a hurried glance at Aunt Janet's face. She was very pale through the dust, and her eyes were closed. Johnny thought then that he had killed her.

He got up—the nervous knees were no longer plunging; then he heard a voice, a little girl-voice, always shrill, but now high pitched to a squeak with terror. It was the voice of Lily Jennings. She stood near and yet aloof, a lovely little flower of a girl, all white-scalloped frills and ribbons, with a big white-frilled hat shading a pale little face and covering the top of a head decorated with wonderful yellow curls. She stood behind a big baby-carriage with a pink-lined muslin canopy, and containing a nest of pink and white, but an empty nest. Lily's little brother's carriage had a spring broken, and she had been to borrow her aunt's baby-carriage, so that nurse could wheel little brother up and down the veranda. Nurse had a headache, and the maids were busy, and Lily, who was a kind little soul, and, moreover, imaginative, and who liked the idea of pushing an empty baby-carriage, had volunteered to go for it. All the way she had been dreaming of what was not in the carriage. She had come directly out of a dream of doll twins when she chanced upon the tragedy in the road.

"What have you been doing now, Johnny Trumbull?" said she. She was tremulous, white with horror, but she stood her ground. It was curious, but Johnny Trumbull, with all his bravery, was always cowed before Lily. Once she had turned and stared at him when he had emerged triumphant but with bleeding nose from a fight, then she had sniffed delicately and gone her way. It had only taken a second, but in that second the victor had met moral defeat.

He looked now at her pale, really scared face, and his own was as pale. He stood and kicked the dust until the swirling column of it reached his head.

"That's right," said Lily; "stand and kick up dust all over me. *What* have you been doing?"

Johnny was trembling so he could hardly stand. He stopped kicking dust.

"Have you killed your aunt?" demanded Lily. It was monstrous, but she had a very dramatic imagination, and there was a faint hint of enjoyment in her tragic voice.

"Guess she's just choked by dust," volunteered Johnny, hoarsely. He kicked the dust again.

"That's right," said Lily. "If she's choked to death by dust, stand there and choke her some more. You are a murderer, Johnny Trumbull, and my mamma will never allow me to speak to you again, and Madame will not allow you to come to school. And — I see your papa driving up the street, and there is the chief policeman's buggy just behind." Lily acquiesced entirely in the extraordinary coincidence of the father and the chief of police appearing upon the scene. The unlikely seemed to her the likely. "Now," said she, cheerfully, "you will be put in state prison and locked up, and then you will be put to death by a very strong telephone."

Johnny's father was leaning out of his buggy looking back at the chief of police in his, and the mare was jogging very slowly in a perfect reek of dust. Lily, who was, in spite of her terrific imagination, human and a girl, rose suddenly to

heights of pity and succor. "They shall never take you, Johnny Trumbull," said she. "I will save you."

Johnny by this time was utterly forgetful of his high status as champion



SUDDENLY HE FOUND HIMSELF BEING IGNOMINIOUSLY SPANKED

(behind her back) of Madame's very select school for select children of a somewhat select village. He was forgetful of the fact that a champion never cries. He cried, he blubbered; tears rolled over his dusty cheeks, making furrows like plowshares of grief. He feared lest he might have killed his aunt Janet. Women, and not very young women, might presumably be unable to survive such rough usage as very tough and at



"WELL, YOU DIDN'T KILL HER THIS TIME," SAID LILY

the same time very limber little boys, and he loved his poor aunt Janet. He grieved because of his aunt, his parents, his uncle, and, rather more particularly, because of himself. He was quite sure that the policeman was coming for him. Logic had no place in his frenzied conclusions. He did not consider how the tragedy had taken place entirely out of sight of a house, that Lily Jennings was the only person who had any knowledge of it. He looked at the masterful, fair-haired little girl like a baby. "How?" sniffed he.

For answer, Lily pointed to the empty baby-carriage. "Get right in," she ordered.

Even in this dire extremity Johnny hesitated. "Can't."

"Yes, you can. It is extra large. Aunt Laura's baby was a twin when he first came, now he's just an ordinary baby, but his carriage is big enough for two. There's plenty of room. Besides, you're a very small boy, very small of your age, even if you do knock all the other boys down and have murdered your aunt. Get in. In a minute they will see you."

There was in reality no time to lose.

Johnny did get in. In spite of the provisions for twins, there was none too much room.

Lily covered him up with the fluffy pink and lace things, and scowled. "You hump up awfully," she muttered. Then she reached beneath him and snatched out the pillow on which he lay, the baby's little bed. She gave it a swift toss over the fringe of wayside bushes into a field. "Aunt Laura's nice embroidered pillow," said she. "Make yourself just as flat as you can, Johnny Trumbull."

Johnny obeyed, but he was obliged to double himself up like a jack-knife. However, there was no sign of him visible when the two buggies drew up. There stood a pale and frightened little girl, with a baby-carriage canopied with rose and lace, and heaped up with rosy and lacy coverlets, presumably sheltering a sleeping infant. Lily was a very keen little girl. She had sense enough not to run. The two men, at the sight of Aunt Janet prostrate in the road, leaped out of their buggies. The doctor's horse stood still, the policeman's trotted away, to Lily's great relief. She even could not imagine Johnny's own father haling him away to state prison and the stern

Arm of Justice. She stood the fire of bewildered questions in the best and safest fashion. She wept bitterly, and her tears were not assumed. Poor little Lily was all of a sudden crushed under the weight of facts. There was Aunt Janet, she had no doubt, killed by her own nephew, and she was hiding the guilty murderer. She had visions of state prison for herself. She watched fearfully while the two men bent over the prostrate woman, who very soon began to sputter and gasp and try to sit up.

"What on earth is the matter, Janet?" inquired Doctor Trumbull, who was paler than his sister-in-law. In fact, she was unable to look very pale on account of dust.

"Ow," sputtered Aunt Janet, coughing violently, "get me up out of this dust, John. Ow!"

"What was the matter?"

"Yes, what has happened, madam?" demanded the chief of police, sternly.

"Nothing," replied Aunt Janet, to Lily's and Johnny's amazement. "What do you think has happened? I fell down in all this nasty dust. Ow!"

"What did you eat for luncheon, Janet?" inquired Doctor Trumbull, as he assisted his sister-in-law to her feet.

"What I was a fool to eat," replied Janet Trumbull, promptly. "Cucumber salad, and lemon jelly with whipped cream."

"Enough to make anybody have indigestion," said Doctor Trumbull. "You have had one of these attacks before, too, Janet. You remember the time you ate strawberry shortcake and ice-cream?"

Janet nodded meekly. Then she coughed again. "Ow, this dust!" gasped she. "For goodness' sake, John, get me home where I can get some water and take off these dusty clothes or I shall choke to death."

"How does your stomach feel?" inquired Doctor Trumbull.

"Stomach is all right now, but I am just choking to death with the dust." Janet turned sharply toward the policeman. "You have sense enough to keep still, I hope," said she. "I don't want the whole town ringing with my being such an idiot as to eat cucumbers and cream together, and being found this way." Janet looked like an animated

creation of dust as she faced the chief of police.

"Yes, ma'am," he replied, bowing and scraping one foot, and raising more dust.

He and Doctor Trumbull assisted Aunt Janet into the buggy, and they drove off. Then the chief of police discovered that his own horse had gone. "Did you see which way they went, sis?" he inquired of Lily, and she pointed down the road, and sobbed as she did so.

The policeman said something bad under his breath, then advised Lily to run home to her ma, and started down the road.

When he was out of sight, Lily drew back the pink-and-white things from Johnny's face. "Well, you didn't kill her this time," said she.

"Why do you s'pose she didn't tell all about it?" said Johnny, gaping at her.

"How do I know? I suppose she was ashamed to tell how she had been fighting, maybe."

"No, that was not why," said Johnny, in a deep voice.

"Why was it, then?"

"*She knew.*"

Johnny began to climb out of the baby-carriage.

"What will she do next, then?" asked Lily.

"I don't know," Johnny replied, gloomily.

He was out of the carriage then, and Lily was readjusting the pillows and things. "Get that nice embroidered pillow I threw over the bushes," she ordered, crossly. Johnny obeyed. When she had finished putting the baby-carriage to rights she turned upon poor little Johnny Trumbull, and her face wore the expression of a queen of tragedy. "Well," said Lily Jennings, "I suppose I shall have to marry you when I am grown up, after all this."

Johnny gasped. He thought Lily the most beautiful girl he knew, but to be confronted with murder and marriage within a few minutes was almost too much. He flushed a burning red. He laughed foolishly. He said nothing.

"It will be very hard on me," stated Lily, "to marry a boy who tried to murder his nice aunt."

Johnny revived a bit under this feminine disdain. "I didn't try to murder her," he said, in a weak voice.

"You might have, throwing her down in all that awful dust, a nice, clean lady. Ladies are not like boys. It might kill them very quickly to be knocked down on a dusty road."

"I didn't mean to kill her."

"You might have."

"Well, I didn't, and—she—"

"What?"

"She spanked me."

"Pooh! That doesn't amount to anything," sniffed Lily.

"It does if you are a boy."

"I don't see why."

"Well, I can't help it if you don't. It does."

"Why shouldn't a boy be spanked when he's naughty, just as well as a girl, I would like to know?"

"Because he's a boy."

Lily looked at Johnny Trumbull. The great fact did remain. He had been spanked, he had thrown his own aunt down in the dust. He had taken advantage of her little-girl protection, but he was a boy. Lily did not understand his why at all, but she bowed before it. However, that she would not admit. She made a rapid change of base. "What," said she, "are you going to do next?"

Johnny stared at her. It was a puzzle.

"If," said Lily, distinctly, "you are afraid to go home, if you think your aunt will tell, I will let you get into Aunt Laura's baby-carriage again, and I will wheel you a little way."

Johnny would have liked at that moment to knock Lily down, as he had his aunt Janet. Lily looked at him shrewdly. "Oh yes," said she, "you can knock me down in the dust there if you want to, and spoil my nice clean dress. You will be a boy just the same."

"I will never marry you, anyway," declared Johnny.

"Aren't you afraid I'll tell on you and get you another spanking if you don't?"

"Tell if you want to. I'd enough sight rather be spanked than marry you."

A gleam of respect came into the little girl's wisely regarding blue eyes. She, with the swiftness of her sex, recognized in forlorn little Johnny the making of a man. "Oh, well," said she, loftily, "I never was a telltale, and anyway, we are not grown up, and there

will be my trousseau to get, and a lot of other things to do first. I shall go to Europe before I am married, too, and I might meet a boy much nicer than you on the steamer."

"Meet him if you want to."

Lily looked at Johnny Trumbull with more than respect—with admiration—but she kept guard over her little tongue. "Well, you can leave that for the future," said she, with a grown-up air.

"I ain't going to leave it. It's settled for good and all now," growled Johnny.

To his immense surprise, Lily curved her white embroidered sleeve over her face and began to weep.

"What's the matter now?" asked Johnny, sulkily, after a minute.

"I think you are a real horrid boy," sobbed Lily.

Lily looked like nothing but a very frilly, sweet, white flower. Johnny could not see her face. There was nothing to be seen except that delicate fluff of white, supported on dainty white-socked, white-slippered limbs.

"Say," said Johnny.

"You are real cruel, when I—I saved your—li-fe," wailed Lily.

"Say," said Johnny, "maybe if I don't see any other girl I like better, I will marry you when I am grown up, but I won't if you don't stop that howling."

Lily stopped immediately. She peeped at him, a blue peep from under the flopping, embroidered brim of her hat. "Are you in earnest?" She smiled faintly. Her blue eyes, wet with tears, were lovely; so was her hesitating smile.

"Yes, if you don't act silly," said Johnny. "Now you had better run home, or your mother will wonder where that baby-carriage is."

Lily walked away, smiling over her shoulder, the smile of the happily subjugated. "I won't tell anybody, Johnny," she called back, in her flute-like voice.

"Don't care if you do," returned Johnny, looking at her with chin in the air and shoulders squared, and Lily wondered at his bravery.

But Johnny was not so brave, and he did care. He knew that his best course was an immediate return home, but he did not know what he might have to face. He could not in the least understand why his aunt Janet had not told at once.

He was sure that she knew. Then he thought of a possible reason for her silence; she might have feared his arrest at the hands of the chief of police. Johnny quailed. He knew his aunt Janet to be rather a brave sort of woman. If she had fears, she must have had reason for them. He might even now be arrested. Suppose Lily did tell. He had a theory that girls usually told. He began to speculate concerning the horrors of prison. Of course he would not be executed, since his aunt was obviously very far from being killed, but he might be imprisoned for a long term.

Johnny went home. He did not kick the dust any more. He walked very steadily and staidly. When he came in sight of the old Colonial mansion, with its massive veranda pillars, he felt chilly. However, he went on. He passed around to the south door and entered and smelled shortcake. It would have smelled delicious had he not had so much on his mind. He looked through the hall, and had a glimpse of his uncle Jonathan in the study, writing. At the right of the door was his father's office. The door of that was open, and Johnny saw his father pouring things from bottles. He did not look at Johnny. His mother crossed the hall. She had on a long white apron, which she wore when making her famous cream shortcakes. She saw Johnny, but merely observed, "Go and wash your face and hands, Johnny; it is nearly supper-time."

Johnny went up-stairs. At the upper landing he found his aunt Janet waiting for him. "Come here," she whispered, and Johnny followed her, trembling, into her own room. It was a large room, rather crowded with heavy, old-fashioned furniture. Aunt Janet had freed herself from dust and was arrayed in a purple silk gown. Her hair was looped loosely on either side of her long face. She

was a handsome woman, after a certain type.

"Stand here, Johnny," said she. She had closed the door, and Johnny was stationed before her. She did not seem in the least injured nor the worse for her experience. On the contrary, there was a bright-red flush on her cheeks, and her eyes shone as Johnny had never seen them. She looked eagerly at Johnny.

"Why did you do that?" she said, but there was no anger in her voice.

"I forgot," began Johnny.

"Forgot what?" Her voice was strained with eagerness.

"That you were not another boy," said Johnny.

"Tell me," said Aunt Janet. "No, you need not tell me, because if you did it might be my duty to inform your



JOHNNY SAW HIS FATHER POURING THINGS FROM BOTTLES





"THANK GOODNESS, AT LAST THERE IS GOING TO BE A FIGHTER IN THE TRUMBULL FAMILY"

parents. I know there is no need of your telling. You *must* be in the habit of fighting with the other boys."

"Except the little ones," admitted Johnny.

To Johnny's wild astonishment, Aunt Janet seized him by the shoulders and looked him in the eyes with a look of adoration and immense approval. "Thank goodness," said she, "at last there is going to be a fighter in the Trumbull family. Your uncle would never fight, and your father would not. Your grandfather would. Your uncle and your father are good men, though; you must try to be like them, Johnny."

"Yes, ma'am," replied Johnny, bewildered.

"I think they would be called better men than your grandfather and my father," said Aunt Janet.

"Yes, ma'am."

"I think it is time for you to have your grandfather's watch," said Aunt

Janet. "I think you are man enough now to take care of it." Aunt Janet had all the time been holding a black leather case. Now she opened it, and Johnny saw the great gold watch which he had seen many times before and had always understood was to be his some day, when he was a man. "Here," said Aunt Janet. "Take good care of it. You must try to be as good as your uncle and father, but you must remember one thing—you will wear a watch which belonged to a man who never allowed other men to crowd him out of the way he elected to go."

"Yes, ma'am," said Johnny. He took the watch.

"What do you say?" inquired his aunt, sharply.

"Thank you."

"That's right. I thought you had forgotten your manners. Your grandfather never did."

"I am sorry, Aunt Janet," muttered Johnny, "that I—"

"You need never say anything about that," his aunt returned, quickly. "I did not see who you were at first. You are too old to be spanked by a woman, but you ought to be whipped by a man, and I wish your grandfather were alive to do it."

"Yes, ma'am," said Johnny. He looked at her bravely. "He could if he wanted to," said he.

Aunt Janet smiled at him proudly. "Of course," said she, "a boy like you never gets the worst of it fighting with other boys."

"No, ma'am," said Johnny.

Aunt Janet smiled again. "Now run and wash your face and hands," said she; "you must not keep supper waiting. Your mother has a paper to write for her club, and I have promised to help her."

"Yes, ma'am," said Johnny. He walked out, carrying the great gold time-piece, bewildered, embarrassed, modest beneath his honors, but little cock of the walk, whether he would or no, for reasons entirely and forever beyond his ken.